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April 13, 2022

Cultivating Liberty

“To speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it” (*Civil Disobedience* Thoreau 1866). It is the individuals’ right and responsibility to cultivate a liberated society through civil and educated action. In doing so, there is the potential for “*at once* a better government” (Thoreau 1866).

To take effective educated action, we must understand the true meaning of liberty, and how it fits into the societal structure. We must understand the difference between equality and equity. We must understand that societal progress is a process, and effort is essential to its growth. Finally, we must see the beauty in a life of opportunity. Opportunity and contrast are what makes life colorful. Liberty is part of what allows us to feel alive. In a lecture to high school students, Chris Jones, a college professor, expressed, “Living is great, but being alive is different.” (2022)

To better understand what a liberated society is, we can look at the etymology of the word liberty. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* shows its first use in the 14th Century. Liberty was defined as “free choice, [or] freedom to do as one chooses,” as well as “freedom from the bondage of sin.” The old French *liberte* was defined as “freedom, liberty, [or] free will,” and the Latin *libertatem* (nominative *libertas*) was defined as “civil or political freedom, [the] condition

of a free man; [or the] absence of restraint.” Lastly, from the late 15th Century, liberty, in relation to personal and community settings, was defined as, a “state of being free from arbitrary, despotic, or autocratic rule [and] control.” (Etymonline)

As William R. Greg wrote in his essay “France in January 1852,” “The French notion of liberty is political equality; the English notion is personal independence” (1882). Cultural context plays a big part in the interpretation of words. This is seen throughout history. In examples such as liberty, we see the meaning change context as it moves location as well as through time. In an article on liberty and human rights by the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, we see a more modern definition presented, “liberty, a state of freedom, especially as opposed to political subjection, imprisonment, or slavery. Its two most generally recognized divisions are political and civil liberty” (Encyclopedia Britannica). This distinction is often misunderstood and misinterpreted. The article continues by defining civil liberty and political liberty:

Civil liberty is the absence of arbitrary restraint and the assurance of a body of rights, such as those found in bills of rights, in statutes, and in judicial decisions. Such liberty, however, is not inconsistent with regulations and restrictions imposed by law for the common good. Political liberty consists of the right of individuals to participate in government by voting and by holding public office. Since the proletarian and socialist movements and the economic dislocations after World War I, liberty has been increasingly defined in terms of economic opportunity and security (Encyclopedia Britannica).

For a society to be truly liberated, it must encourage both civil liberty and political liberty. There must be individual agency for every citizen, allowing for diverse interests,

opinions, and opportunities. Likewise, there must be the ability for each citizen to become involved with their communities.

This concept is where many people begin the debate of equality versus equity. To understand this debate more fully, we must understand the similarities and differences of these words. Equality and equity sound similar but they have very different meanings. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* shows how both words date back to roughly the 14th century. However, equality was first defined as “evenness, smoothness, [and] uniformity.” It was often used in reference to numbers or amounts. The Old French *égalité* and the Latin *aequalitatem* (nominative *aequalitas*) followed similar definitions of “likeness, uniformity, similarity, etc.” These transition to the modern English definition of “the state of being equal” most commonly used in reference to rights, privileges, etc. (Etymonline)

The *Online Etymology Dictionary* shows the word equity, or the English *equite*, was first defined as the “quality of being equal or fair, impartiality.” The Old French *equite*, was defined as “that which is equally right or just to all concerned,” and the Latin *aequitatem* (nominative *aequitas*) was defined as “the uniform relation of one thing to others, equality, conformity, symmetry... and just or equitable conduct toward others.” A common term in law is *natural equity*, defined as “fairness in the adjustment of conflicting interests; the settlement of controversies by the dictates of good conscience” (Etymonline)

Sociology began using the term equity in the late 20th century. As Stuart S. Nagel, a professor of political science, describes it in his essay “Equity as a Policy Goal,” equity is “allocating benefits in various policy fields in such a way as to provide groups, persons, and places with at least a minimum level of benefits so as to satisfy basic needs” (1983). As we see

here, equality and equity both link to the word “equal,” but their implications and implementations are very different.

The article “Equity vs. Equality: What’s the Difference?” from The Milken Institute School of Public Health, presents a four-panel cartoon to introduce the differences between inequality, equality, equity, and justice. (appx.)

The first panel depicts the concept of “inequality” showing an apple tree leaning to the left with two children underneath. The child on the left stands with arms outstretched to catch a falling apple. The child on the right, also standing with arms outstretched, is drawn with a question mark next to him showing his confusion as no apples have fallen into his hands. There is no explanation as to why he did not receive an apple, and it appears there is no logical cause. It is simply “unfair” and “unequal.”

The second panel depicts “equality” showing the same leaning apple tree this time with each child on a ladder of equal proportions. The child on the left is happily picking apples as his ladder is the perfect height for that side of the tree. Now with an exclamation point to show distress, the child on the left stands on the same height ladder but cannot reach the apples. Both children have received “equal” assistance in their apple picking adventures, but it doesn’t seem quite “fair.”

In the third panel, exemplifying “equity,” we see again the leaning apple tree and the two children. The child on the left is on the same ladder, again happily picking apples. However, in this panel, the child on the right is depicted on a taller ladder, at last allowing the necessary height for a happy apple picking experience. This example finally shows a “fair” experience as both children are happily picking apples. The important concept to note here is that they each reached their goals in a different way. As individuals, they both wanted a happy apple picking

experience, but they started with very different circumstances, and therefore, very different needs when it came to assistance.

The last panel shows us the concept of “justice.” We see the apple tree and the children. This time both children are on ladders of the same height, and both are happily picking apples. To make this possible, however, the tree has been propped up by boards on the left side and anchored by ropes on the right. This is a “fair” example, but instead of assisting the children to reach higher levels themselves, they've been given equal treatment, and it's the tree that has been modified.

In our society, many people fight for equality, when what they actually want is equity. They might think they want the same exact rights and privileges as their neighbor, but if they are starting on a different level or want to reach a different goal, equality will ultimately be unhelpful and unfair. Equity, on the other hand, allows room for personalized assistance and circumstance. Every individual has unique experiences, interests, and needs. Equality results in uniformity. Equity results in fairness.

“I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward.” (Thoreau 1866). In a liberated society, citizens should feel respected by the government regarding their individual rights and responsibilities. Liberty can only exist in an environment where there is equity and the freedom to choose, where there is the opportunity for personal growth both in interests and ideas, and where each citizen acts on the opportunity for personal growth. Citizens of a liberated society should have the right to have access to opportunities, and it is their responsibility to pursue those opportunities. Citizens should have a safe environment to experience failure and victory, and to share the knowledge gained from each.

In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Nelson Mandela said, “I learned to have the patience to listen when people put forward their views, even if I think those views are wrong. You can't reach a just decision in a dispute unless you listen to both sides, ask questions, and view the evidence placed before you.” Be curious and seek to understand both sides. It will strengthen your own opinion in addition to the impact it makes on the opposition. Mandela continued, “If you don't allow people to contribute, to offer their point of view, or to criticize what has been put before them, then they can never like you and you can never build that instrument of collective leadership” (“Oprah Interviews Nelson Mandela.” 2013).

It is our right to have personal interests, but the only way to protect that right is by having and sharing educated personal opinions. Sharing opinions is how a society grows. Let your voice be heard, but don't forget to listen.

Growth cannot exist without conflict. Likewise, liberty cannot exist without conflict. In “Federalist Paper No. 10,” James Madison declares:

There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.

It could never be more truly said than of the first remedy, that it was worse than the disease. Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air, which is essential to animal life, because it imparts to fire its destructive agency. (1787)

Not only should we have the right to personal interests, but also personal opinions. To form a liberated society it is necessary to have multiple sides of an argument, and understand each of them to an extent. Liberty cannot exist without factions. Likewise, factions cannot exist without opposition and contrast. When there is a lack of opposition, growth cannot exist. A truly liberated society cannot be cultivated unless individuals interact with distinct and contrasting opinions.

It should be acknowledged, a society of contrast and individualism allows room for imperfection and failure. There is a natural risk to living in a liberated society. Regardless, it is the right and the responsibility of the citizen to encourage individualism and protect free agency.

As stated in “The Declaration of Independence:”

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.” (Jefferson 1776)

Historical evidence exemplifies that societies need structure, and often the mode chosen for said structure is government. However, at times it is forgotten that a governments’ purpose is not to rule. The intent of the government is to lead and guide. Government should serve the people, not the other way around.

In “The Sovereignty of the People,” by William Greene, it reads:

The purpose of government is to enable the people of a nation to live in safety and happiness. Government exists for the interests of the governed, not for the governors... The ultimate powers in a society, therefore, rest in the people themselves, and they should exercise those powers, either directly or through representatives, in every way they are competent and that is practicable. (1868)

In a liberated society, power lies in the hands of the people, both as individuals and as a whole. To cultivate such a society, citizens must take action. If citizens do not take action, they become passive and uninvolved. Many individuals say they believe in a cause, but how many actually take action to support it? Thoreau describes a passive citizen as follows:

They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition—but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. At most they give only a cheap vote, and a feeble countenance and Godspeed, to the right, as it goes by them. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man; but it is easier to deal with the real possessor of a thing than with the temporary guardian of it.” (1866)

Passive citizens cannot create a liberated society. However, wrongly passionate citizens can also cause harm. Martin Luther King Jr’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” reads, “One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” (1963). The government is far from perfect, and politicians even farther. It is the people's job to make sure the government is functioning with justice and civility.

In *Democracy in America* Alexis de Tocqueville states, “Everybody feels the evil, but no one has courage or energy enough to seek the cure” (1835). However, feeling the effects of evil does not give justification to evil actions as a response. Automatically reverting to violent protest is not an option. In “The Other America,” another work from Martin Luther King, Jr., we read, “Let me say as I’ve always said, and I will always continue to say, that riots are socially destructive and self-defeating... I will continue to condemn riots, and continue to say to my brothers and sisters that this is not the way... But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?” (1967). It is important to consider what causes violent protests. What is our society failing to acknowledge? What can we as citizens do to hear these conflicts? And what might we do differently with that newly acquired knowledge?

It is necessary to approach conflict in an informed, educated, and civil manner. Effective change in a community requires passion and desire. However, passion and desire can only take you so far without knowledge, wisdom, and civility.

As stated previously, opposition in ideas is necessary for the cultivation of a liberated society. However, opposition does not mean contempt. In *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt* by Arthur C. Brooks it reads, “We all want a safer, fairer, more prosperous country. We just disagree on how to achieve that aim. We need a passionate competition of ideas so that each side refines its solutions, becomes more innovative, and therefore the best ideas rise to the top” (2019).

If no contrasting ideas are presented, progress is impossible. Change cannot occur in such an environment, and neither can liberty. Individuals should share their opinions, even as a faction or small fraction of the community. “A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority.”

(Thoreau 1866). Liberty thrives in an environment of contrasting opportunities. There must always be natural boundaries and consequences. Where citizens take their rights seriously hand in hand with their responsibilities, that is where true liberty thrives. In *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* Eliezer Yudkowsky writes, “You are personally responsible for becoming more ethical than the society you grew up in” (2010).

There will always be some form of natural consequence, positive or negative, immediate or delayed. When a society forms an environment of liberty, there are reasonable laws and boundaries in place to sustain the structure, but they are not there to restrict. Influencing power is a right of the people, but “with great power comes great responsibility” (Stan Lee 1962). Right and responsibility go hand in hand, each must work with and influence the other.

In a speech titled “The Spirit of Liberty,” Judge Learned Hand declared:

What do we mean when we say that first of all we seek liberty? I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me... Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it... What is this liberty that must lie in the hearts of men and women? It is not the ruthless, the unbridled will; it is not the freedom to do as one likes. That is the denial of liberty and leads straight to its overthrow. A society in which men recognize no check on their freedom soon becomes a society where freedom is the possession of only a savage few -- as we have learned to our sorrow.

Liberty must come from the people. First, however, it is necessary that the people understand what liberty is. There is a need to educate individuals on the beauty and power that

comes from living in a liberated society. Each individual should fully understand their personal rights and responsibilities as a citizen and then act likewise to their utmost ability. Judge Learned Hand Continued:

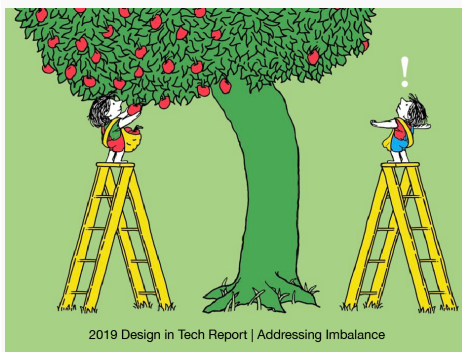
What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias..." (1944)

We need to take action if we want to make a difference in our society. I urge you to seek to understand all sides of the debate, educate yourself and your community, and share your opinions. Join the fight for equity and work to cultivate a liberated society.

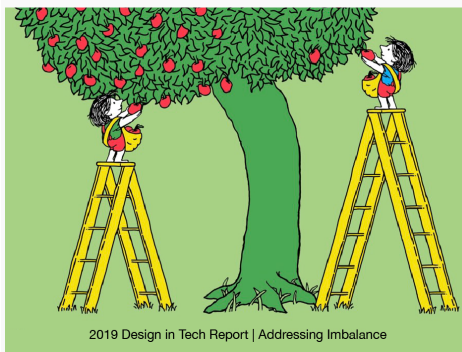
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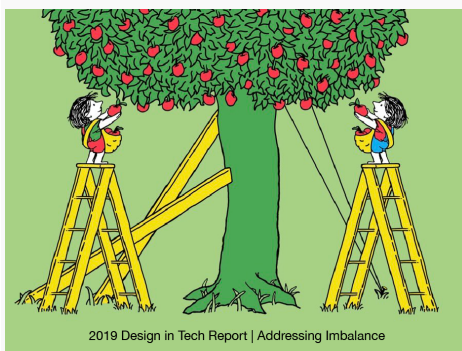
INEQUALITY



EQUALITY



EQUITY



JUSTICE

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